Interview with Mr. Merle C. Cunningham
conducted by Dr. James L. Dodson and
Miss Paula Boyer. 12/15/70

Merle: . . . We had about two and half acres and had about a thousand chickens, up to 1500 at times, which was a small flock. We had also 140 peach trees on this place. At that time there were two canners in Van Nuys. One year we couldn't sell apricots to the canners. We cut them and split them out on the trees. We covered them with a thin building paper. This would keep them on darkening in the center when they dried.

Dodson: I'm glad to hear you describe that. Nobody else has described the drying process. Is that the way it is done at the present time?

Merle: I'm not familiar with how they do it now. . . . I guess that some places they are sundried. These were sundried too. We spread the trees out to the sun.

Dodson: Did you have some sheds you put them in when you burned the sulfur?

Merle: No. We were out in the open.

Dodson: I see.

Boyer: How long does the process take?

Merle: Well, I don't recall exactly. I think it only took a few days. Maybe a week. I don't recall how long that was. That wasn't normal. Usually we sold them to the cannery. By the way when those trees got older and were dying and not producing, well I dug them out by hand. One hundred and forty trees and cut them up for firewood. When we moved on Raymer St., there was a well. But we did have city water by that time. But there was an old well there with a pump. And we had carasin lamps on the wall just as it had been in Idaho. In fact, we had telephone up there on a party line. We didn't have a telephone here in Van Nuys for a time. And we heated with a wood stove and cooked on a carizen stove a year or two before we got gas.

Boyer: There wasn't very many people out here then?

Merle: It was definitely a rural area. The Van Nuys town site was one square mile bounded by Kester, Oxnard, Haseltine and Vanowen. Outside of that area was larger tracts, mostly five or ten acres or less. Some were two and a half, like ours was. There was a good deal of poultry. There was a hatchery (owned) by D. R. Holloway out on Sherman Way. And others around . . . They raised apricots, peaches and walnuts. And quite a few Lima

beans were farmed there. And poultry Now it wasn't too long after that --- five or six years -- taxes were up to the point where it wasn't very profitable to farm in this area. Many of the farmers prominent in the early days here went up north, because at that time water came in . . Patterson and Tracy in the West San Fernando Valley. One of the pioneer real estate men was Charles A. Bevis.

Dodson: I think I heard that name.

Merle: His father-in-law, Lee May, went into partnership with Mr. Bevis. . . . made quite a name for himself in farming. Going to high school here he was a hair-in-scarm kid. He became quite a major citizen up there. Later sold out and bought some 12,000 acres in British Honduras. In fact, he has something to do with making a more firm, hard tomato fit for (picking) by machine. He was written up by the National Geographic Magazine four or five years ago.

Boyer: What was his name?

Merle: His name was Albert Bevis.

Dodson: There is a street with his name.

Merle: There is also a May street. Other old time farmers -- such as Harry Klemmers (?), such probably heard of him, he . on a big scale. He had a son George Klemmer who also went up there and farmed And Mr. Petit -- Stanley Petit -- his father was a large scale farmer in this area. There was another: D. P. Keppie (?) I could name quite a few like that. But the town site was this one square mile. It was sparsely built at that time. The town was only 10 years old (1921) . .. a good many of the streets had many vacant lots. As the depression came on, you could buy any residence lot in Van Nuys -- except a few which were on Hamlin and Sylvan--which are wider streets. Any other you could buy for $500. And you could build a pretty good five room house for $2,500.

This house here I bought when we got married in 1934. The house was then seven years old. I bought it for $3,000. It has 1300 square feet. It has only two bedrooms although it has six rooms, one a library. It was build for lady giving music lessons in that library. That was the music room. It had a piano. An interesting thing about that her estranged husband, she was a Mrs. Lindsey, when she came to this door right out here. He rang the door bell. When she came to the door he shot himself right out there on the porch.

Dodson: You house has a bit of history on its own. I don't know if that's the kind of history you like.

Merle: I didn't tell her that for a while. (Laughter).

Dodson: Let's see. I was going to ask you about the poultry.

was that sold in Los Angeles or shipped east.

Merle: Poultry was raised primarily for eggs.

Dodson: Oh, I see.

Merle: There were egg buyers that came around and picked up the eggs. There were several poultry supplies houses in Van Nuys. One was owned by a Mr. Griff Stear (?). He later committed suicide. by the way. Then there is several others. There was the Van Nuys Grain and Tree Co. operated by Mr. Charles M. Bell. Of course, as poultry reached the head of the game pass the best production age. They were sold. And you got baby chicks that reached a certain size, a pound or so, the boilers were sold. Two dealers that came out from the city, I think, We operated on such a small scale we didn't have much contact with the people who dealt with the bigger operators.

Dodson: Did you go to school here in the Valley?

Merle: Yes, I did. I went into Van Nuys High School in 1921 in the middle of my junior year, in the middle of my junior year. And I graduated from Van Nuys High School in 1922. Mrs.Cunningham (she was Miss Northrop then). She graduated in 1923. And our children, all three of them, graduated here. But my class had 48 people in it. Later there were two (graduating) classes a year and they had 750.They had about 3,000 enrollment material 20 years ago. Now our granddaughter is in the senior class this year in Van Nuys High School.

Dodson: You had three generations.

Merle: Three generations, yes, in Van Nuys High School. When we were going to school the principal was Nathan F. Smith, a very fine gentleman who retired the year she graduated, the next year after I did. In fact, he announced his retirement at the commencement exercises. It was a shock to everybody. No one was expecting it. He was instrumental in the Board of Education acquiring more land for the campus. That is why the football field up there is called Smith Field.

Dodson: That's interesting. No one else has told us these these things.

Merle: I'll show you his picture. Now when I didn't go on to college. I did well but in high school. I had straight As, as a matter of fact. But my folks were very hard up and it would be too much of a burden for me to go on to school. I did, however, take a competitive examination for a scholarship at Cal Tech. I was pretty good in mathematics and thought I might be good as a civil engineer. I didn't win that competition. In fact, I didn't do very well on that test. So I gave up here. the idea of going on to school. At that time there was a new bank in Van Nuys. It had been organized by Mr. W. P. Whitsett. He was the subdivider

of the original townsite. It happened on Feb. 22, 1911. He had been involved with the First National Bank of Van Nuys, which later became the California Bank, now the United California Bank.

But he formed the new bank in November 19, 1921. I was still in school. It was called the Bank of Van Nuys. He contacted Mr. Smith, I guess, at the High School about those coming out of the graduation class in June 1922, that he might recommend to got into the bank. I guess Mr. Smith gave him my name, because the vice president Mr. W. P. Beercan did not see my folks to see if I would work at the bank. I never thought I would care for any more work. But they put it up to me in such a way to where this would be the ground floor and so forth. I did. Last day of school, in those days, went to June 30th. July 1st which was a Saturday I started work at the bank. I worked there for 47 years in one bank. The only time I was ever our of there was one week when they sent me down to our Sepulveda-Ventura branch. They had gotten into quite a mess. Their books were out of balance. They sent me down to straighten things out. Otherwise I was there (original bank) the whole time.

Now I'm not the type that you'd expect to fine ambitious to rise to positions of authority executive and administrative positions. I'm not good on that line. But I do like detailed work. And I'm pretty good at that. Over the years I've learned to absorb the monotonous work that knock some people off the wall. I just eat it up. I've learned to make a game out of it, a challenge out of it.

Dodson: That's quite an accomplishment.

Merle: I never worked in credit. I was always in operations. Now I could tell you a lot about banking, if you like, clerial work, office work.

Dodson: Anything you can tell us about banking here in Van Nuys would be fine. No one else has.

Merle: Of course, banking has changed altogether from the late Fifties, early Sixties, when they went on computers. Up to that time there was a great deal of volume work to be done. Operating posting machines, adding checks.journalism checks, adding up the balances of all the accounts on the ledger, service charges, computer interest, all those . . . were my specialty. And balancing the books to see if they balance. Now, there used to be . . . When I started work at the bank, it was $30 a month. In those days they regarded your work the first year at the bank as sort of an apprenticeship. In fact, they told us that we were just enrolled for six months. They were showing us the business, you know. You got a raise from time to time, not very fast. In fact, the cashier of the bank got only a 150 a month.

Dodson: Then you weren't doing so badly, after all

Merle: I issued a. . . $30 a month . I carried paper around on a bicycle. I needed more money. I drove a car router. I got

up at 3:30 in the morning. That bicycle I could account for ridden it 20,000 miles. You only need to ride a bike 10 miles a day for 3,000 miles a year. I did that for six years. If I

stayed out late some evening, didn't get to be, hardly any sleep, I actually had it happen, I would dose off, go to sleep standing up at an adding machine. I would have to back to the restroom and wash my face with cold water to keep awake. (laughter) In those days banks always felt that any bookkeeping error should be located. They never thought of charging off the difference. Now the teller's cash difference you might not always find them . .. Transactions over the counter are not subject to review. When you're out of balance at the end of the day . . .

Dodson: When you're out of balance at the end of the day, do you work and work?

Merle: Yes, they try to find it. They try to finger what it was.

Dodson: I wonder if there's a penny discrepancy would they pay much attention?>

Merle: Not too much for that size difference. They would just recount the checks that they cashed and run out. They would of course be . . . by the . . . department. If there were any errors, they would be corrected. They would count their pennies carefully. By the way in those days there was some gold coins. Now a two and half dollar gold piece is just the same size as a dime. It looks like a penny because of the color. Now if a teller was short $2.49, no matter where he was he would look for a penny that was actually a gold piece. The bookkeeping differences you're expected to find. There's major hours laws. You could . . . as much as you want. I have worked several times until the sun come up the next morning, looking for a penny. I went for 20 years and never charged off a penny in a journal difference. Now a journal is when your checks all come in from various sources and the reserved bank and other banks they are proved in the morning and are all sorted out and alphabetical order, Nowadays it is numerical. Then they're all posted to accounts and then added up and they should bring out the same total as from their sources. If they don't you should be able to find it. And it wasn't a few years they got posting machines that ran a journal, as a carbon copy of the items that were posted on the ledger sheets, kept a journal total. So when you got through your ledger, you just totaled out that journal total. And you didn't have to rerun the checks and you knew the the journal had the checks listed the same as posted on the accounts.

Part of the system of proving is two sets of books: ledger for the bank and statement that went out to the customer. Of course, these were from different people. You compare. That should have picked up any errors. Unless the errors were made by both operators. That happens,because people make so many poor penciled figures. Somebody makes a three that looks like a five.

Then you're out of balance two dollars. Experienced people and I became adapt at that sort of thing. Usually you find that sort of difference by just thumbing through the checks. If you're out a few dollars you look for a four that looks like a seven or something of that sort. Generally you could pick up the one that was bad enough that operators had posted wrong. And of course to prevent that we tried to emphasize that the clerks that added the checks up turned them in the morning, from the ...[?], marked over every bad check so that it was certain to be posted properly. Now if I couldn't pick it up by ...[?] then I run them over, just run the pile of checks over and probably pick it up that way. But sometimes you'd actually have to cross check, ...[?]. The worse thing that could happen was a counter error, now you thought the checks bounced, they say they bounced, so you release the checks in the file without the statements and somebody brought back the statement with a check that had pushed at $10.00 too much. ....[?] $10.00 too small but you didn't have the checks there to ...[?] you had to work from the journal or the source the ...[?] proof sheets to the journal, check them across one by one, you usually did that ...[?] by machine, you add all of them up to add the 10 dollar digit in that column on the one side and on the other ...[?] take another ...[?] that could ...[?] took days. But I worked 20 years and never charged off a penny then finally during the war when we such short, so much inexperienced help they didn't want me to spend that much time anymore, they insisted that if I, after ...[?] running them over, was out less than a dollar charge it off, so I did that. Now, on the ledgers, every once in awhile, you add up all the balances in the ledger, see, there's a control for each ledger, every time you ...[?] there's a certain total of deposits that the ...[?] checks ...[?] Then when you add up the individual accounts after a few days of pushing they should equal that control, if they don't a lot of things could have happened, the correction could have been made wrong, of course there's always a possibilty of lost checks or ...[?]. Now, I never did charge off the ledger sheet, went over 40 years, never charged off the ledger difference and I became so expert at finding ...[?] they often would send young fellas to work as my assistant for awhile to get some training ...[?] if you're out a sizable amount first thing you do is see if it's divisable by nine if the amount, if your differnece is divisable by nine it can be a transposition, that is 20 dollars where there's 2 dollars or something like that where there's secondary forms of it like 13 for 31, 24 for 42, 53 for 35 and so forth and there's other techniques that can be applied. I guess I also had other duties, I did auditing and I had charge of the ...[?] accounts, now there's a thing you might find interesting especially the savings accounts, maybe the husband hasa savings account, don't want his wife to know about it, he dies, she ...[?] and here it is just lying here, now according to the law the bank can only pay interest for ten years after there has been evidence of knowledge of the account by deposit or withdrawal or the book being presented for ...[?] and after certain length of time, it was 20 years, I think it's 15 now, I'm not sure about that, the money is turned over to the

state of California under the abandoned property act, it can be reclaimed if ...[?] red tape but we didn't want any of our deposits money to go that way we wanted them to have the money

and I turned very few over like that. Now, for instance, there were, during the war and just following it under the ...[?] administration there was a, what you might call a branch, at ...[?] branch in ...[?] General Hospital which is where the Birmingham Junior High School is now. There was a 3,000 bed hospital out there with 6 miles of corridor and we had a facility out there, we sent two tellers out every day to work there and when we'd open new accounts, we had some 2,000 accounts from there and we didn't at first get enough information, we got their ward number, things like that but we didn't get their original address and their nearest of kin and so forth, so here ...[?] this 2500 dollar account, just laying there and come to find out the man had died, we didn't have his address or anything ...[?] and I spent a lot of time on that. I worked through the Advocate General's office, and got his home address and his nearest of kin, turned out to be in Hawaii, he was Hawaiian, you know. And after a certain period of time they established a claim and got the money, I ...[?]. I guess that's probably enough about banking. Oh, I could tell you a lot of things, that man, that I mentioned, Mr. Whitsett's vice-president, W.E. ...[?] he didn't stay with the bank very long, he left and opened a private loan company here in Van Nuys, he lived to be in the 90's and he was present at my retirement party a few years, seven years ago, the fellow that hired me was present at my retirement people (laughter) ...[?] many other people. But he was